

Holy Horrors: The Crusades

By James A. Haught



Excerpt from [Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness](#), by James A. Haught (Prometheus Books, 2002). Reprinted with permission from the author.

The Crusades

Through the haze of legend, the Crusades are remembered as a romantic quest by noble knights wearing crimson crosses. In reality, the Crusades were a

sickening nightmare of slaughter, rape, looting, and chaos—mixed with belief in magic. The crusaders killed nearly as many Christians and Jews as they did Muslims, their intended target.

Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade in 1095 to wrest the Holy Land from infidels. “Deus Vult” (God wills it) became the rallying cry. Around Europe, masses of zealots swarmed into mob-type armies led by charismatic priests. Tens of thousands followed an unwashed priest, Peter the Hermit, who displayed a letter he said was written to him by God and delivered to him by Jesus as his credentials for leadership. Other thousands followed a priest called Walter the Penniless.

In the Rhine Valley of Germany, one throng of crusaders followed a goose they thought had been enchanted by God to be their guide. This group joined the army of Emich of Leisingen, a leader who said a cross miraculously had appeared on his chest as a holy sign. Emich’s multitude decided that, before marching 2,000 miles to kill God’s enemies in Israel, their first religious duty was to slay “the infidels among us,” the Jews of Mainz, Worms, and other German cities. They swept in unstoppable waves through Jewish quarters, chopping and burning thousands of defenseless men, women, and children. Many Jews, trapped and doomed in barricaded quarters, tearfully killed their children and themselves before the mob broke in.

Similar hordes led by priests Volkmar and Gottschalk likewise massacred Jews of Prague and Regensburg, Bavaria. Occasionally, victims were given a last-minute opportunity, at swordpoint, to save their lives by converting to Christianity. As the various peasant armies moved through Christian Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, they pillaged the countryside for food, provoking battles with local peoples and armies. In one clash, Peter the Hermit’s army killed 4,000 Christian residents of Zemun, Yugoslavia, then burned nearby Belgrade. In turn, thousands of crusaders died in confused fighting in Bulgaria. Only a fraction of the peasant mobs finally reached Muslim Turkey, where they soon were exterminated by Turkish armies.

Organized regiments of Christian knights followed the rabble, bringing professionalism to the Crusade. Accompanying bishops blessed their atrocities. The advancing legions decapitated Muslims and carried the heads as trophies. During three sieges—at Nicea, Antioch, and Tyre—crusaders catapulted Muslim heads into the surrounded cities to demoralize defenders. After a victory on the Syrian coast near Antioch, Frankish crusaders brought 500 heads back to camp. Three hundred of them were put on stakes before the city to torment defenders atop the walls. Chronicler-priests recorded that a crusader bishop called the impaled heads a joyful spectacle for the people of God. The other 200 heads were catapulted into Antioch. Inside, Muslims decapitated Antioch's Christian residents and catapulted their heads outward in a grotesque crossfire. The crusaders finally broke through on June 3, 1098, and slaughtered inhabitants. Then an arriving Muslim army encircled Antioch and besieged the former besiegers. The Franks were near starvation when one Peter Bartholomew announced that a saint had appeared to him in a vision and disclosed that the lance that pierced Christ's side at the crucifixion was buried beneath a Christian church in Antioch. The Holy Lance was dug up and became a miraculous relic inspiring the crusaders to ferocity. They stormed out of the city in a fanatical onslaught that sent the Muslim soldiers fleeing in panic, abandoning their camp—and their wives. Chronicler Fulcher of Chartres proudly recorded: "When their women were found in the tents, the Franks did nothing evil to them except pierce their bellies with their lances."

(Whether the Holy Lance was genuine or a planted fake wasn't questioned by the crusade's chronicler-priests. Christendom was obsessed with finding and worshiping sacred relics, alleged evidence from Bible stories. Fragments of "the true cross," pieces of saints' bodies, stillwet tears shed by Jesus, barbs from the Crown of Thorns, Mary's undergarments—such were treasured in jeweled cases in every major church. A ruler of Saxony proudly possessed 17,000 relics, including a branch from Moses's burning bush and a feather from the wings of the Angel Gabriel. Canterbury Cathedral displayed part of the clay left over after

God fashioned Adam. Historian Charles Mackay said Spanish churches had six or seven thighbones of the Virgin Mary, and others had enough of St. Peter's toenails to fill a sack. Voltaire noted that six sacred foreskins were snipped from Jesus at his circumcision; later researchers counted fifteen.)

Marching on to Jerusalem, the crusaders soon topped the walls and "purified" the symbolic city by slaughtering virtually every resident. Jews who took shelter in their synagogue were burned alive. Corpses were piled in the streets. Chronicler Raymond of Aguilers recorded:

Wonderful things were to be seen. Numbers of the Saracens were beheaded.... Others were shot with arrows, or forced to jump from the towers; others were tortured for several days, then burned in flames. In the streets were seen piles of heads and hands and feet. One rode about everywhere amid the corpses of men and horses....

In the temple of Solomon, the horses waded in blood up to their knees, nay, up to the bridle. It was a just and marvelous judgment of God, that this place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers.

During the subsequent two centuries, Muslim recaptures of portions of the Holy Land caused seven other Christian crusades. Most of these expeditions began, as the first had, with massacres of Jews at home.

In the Third Crusade, after Richard the Lion-Hearted captured Acre in 1191, he ordered 3,000 captives—many of them women and children—taken outside the city and massacred. The corpses were cut open in a search for swallowed gems. Bishops intoned blessings. Chronicler Ambroise wrote: "They were slaughtered every one. For this be the Creator blessed!" Infidel lives were of no consequence. As St. Bernard of Clairvaux had declared in launching the Second Crusade: "The

Christian glories in the death of a pagan, because thereby Christ himself is glorified.”

In the Fourth Crusade, the armies became diverted and sacked the Christian cities of Constantinople and Zara. The Children’s Crusade in 1212 was a tragedy based on the mistaken belief that God would empower innocent Christian tots to overwhelm Muslim armies. Most of the children perished without reaching the Holy Land.

Finally, it all came to an end in 1291 when Muslims recaptured the last Christian stronghold, Acre, and slaughtered its garrison in retaliation for Richard’s massacre a century earlier. The Holy Land was back in Muslim hands. Two centuries of death and destruction had been for nothing.

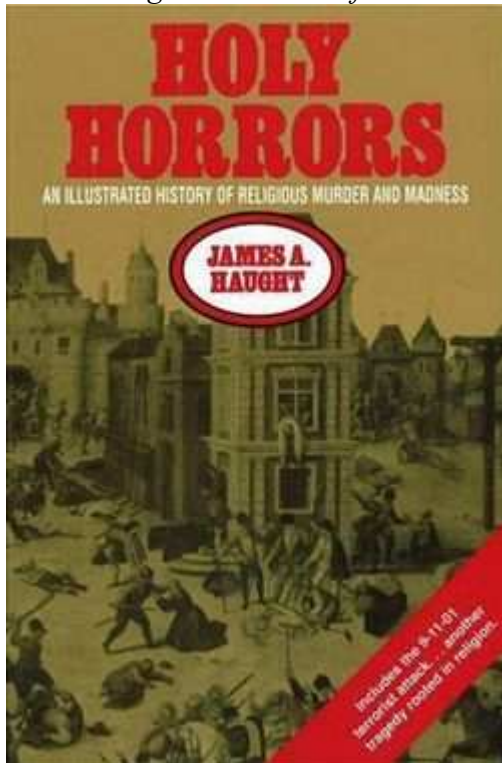
Subsequent popes attempted to rouse armies for further crusades, but few legions responded. A final spasm occurred three centuries later, after Muslims had captured Constantinople. Pope Pius V decreed a crusade, and Christian kings supplied a naval armada commanded by Don Juan of Austria. French historian Henry Daniel-Rops recounted:

On October 7, 1571, Christ’s warriors, chanting the psalms, gave battle in the Gulf of Lepanto. It was a terrible engagement, full of surprises and anxiety. Don Juan himself stood on the prow of his flagship, holding a crucifix. When evening fell over the glorious bay, the smoke of burning Turkish galleys spread a reek of timber and corpses. The entire enemy fleet had been destroyed or captured, and aboard the Marquesa a wounded soldier named Miguel de Cervantes, whose arm had been shattered in the fight, joined in the Te Deum.

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James A. Haught is editor emeritus of the *Charleston* (West Virginia) *Gazette* and a senior editor of *Free Inquiry*. He is also the author of numerous books and articles; his most recent book is [*Religion is Dying: Soaring Secularism in America and the West*](#) (Gustav Broukal Press, 2010). Haught has won 21 national newswriting awards and thirty of his columns have been distributed by national syndicates. He is in *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Contemporary Authors*, and *2000 Outstanding Intellectuals of the 21st Century*. His website is haught.net.



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